Center for Immigration Studies

Backgrounder

May 2003

North American Borders: Why They Matter

By Glynn Custred

A view held by many today, especially in the business world and among libertarians, is that borders will eventually melt away in the face of new market forces, resulting in what business consultant Kenichi Ohmae envisions as a "borderless world." What is really happening is more complex. Some borders are eroding while others are undergoing transformations and reconfigurations of different kinds. And in the European Union, as internal borders have been reduced, new outer borders have been created that function like those of traditional national boundaries. Borders, therefore, still matter and will matter for some time to come. This is nowhere more clearly revealed than in the case of the changing borders of North America.

Borders, like all other human institutions, have both instrumental and symbolic functions. The instrumental functions of international boundaries are to mark the place on the ground where one sovereignty ends and another begins. It is along these lines that a state has the legal right to exercise control over the movement of goods and people to and from the sovereign territory and whose violation by outside forces defines invasion. Borders also matter because of their symbolic significance. As Peter Andreas points out, " . . . statecraft is not just about power politics and deploying material resources. It is also about image and deploying symbolic resources." Power depends not only on physical abilities and coercion, but also on legitimacy and its symbolic representation (Andreas 2000: 143). A border, however, is not only a territorial reality, nor is its symbolic value restricted to statecraft, for a border also "encapsulates the identity of a community" through the interaction of its members with other communities against which it is distinguished or wishes to distinguish itself (Cohen 1985: 12). A border, therefore, is represented not just by a line on the ground but also in the collective minds of citizens, constituting an important element in the way people imagine the nation as a limited, sovereign community of citizens to which they belong.

Siblings, Not Twins

The Friendship Arch on the U.S.-Canada border in Blaine, Wash., proclaims the two countries as "Children of a Common Mother." The inscription asserts both their cultural unity and their political separateness. In fact, there are probably no two countries in the world more alike than the United States and Canada demographically, socially, economically, and (with the exception of the French-speaking enclave in Quebec) linguistically and culturally. Some 200 million people cross the border every year, and the trade relation that unites them economically is the largest in the world. A very telling example of our cultural ties occurred when terrorists attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. Three days after the attack, 100,000 Canadians gathered on the lawn of Parliament Hill in Ottawa and sang the American national anthem. "You don't often see Canadians singing the U.S. national anthem with tears in their eyes," said Canadian Deputy Prime Minister John Manley, "but you did that day." The reason, said Manley,

Glynn Custred is a professor in the Department of Anthropology at California State University, Hayward.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Despite cultural similarities and strong economic ties, the United States and Canada are not only different sovereign states but also different nations; siblings, as the saying goes, not twins.

was "because there was a real consciousness that our [Canadian] society and our values were also under attack."

Very Different Histories. Despite cultural similarities and strong economic ties, the United States and Canada are not only different sovereign states but also different nations; siblings, as the saying goes, not twins. Seymour Martin Lipset quotes Canadian author Margaret Atwood in this regard: "Americans and Canadians are not the same," she writes, "they are the products of two very different histories, two very different situations" (Lipset 1990: 12). History for Canada, says Lipset, has been a "long struggle to preserve a historical source of legitimacy: government deriving its title-to-rule from a monarchy linked to a church establishment." The United States, on the other hand, "celebrates the overthrow of an oppressive state, the triumph of the people, a successful effort to create a type of government never seen before." Thus "government power is feared in the south" while "unbridled popular sovereignty has been a concern in the north." Indeed, the United States is in general "libertarian," that is, the United States has been more generally focused on the individual and suspicious of state power while Canada is more statist in its orientation — more deferential to authority and more comfortable with government power. These traits mean that Canada constitutes what Canadian author Robertson Davies calls "a socialist monarchy."

Lipset evokes an often-used analogy to describe differences between the two countries. Both are trains running along parallel tracks. Both are thousands of miles from their starting point, yet they are still separate (Lipset 1990: 212). The similarities, however, mostly outweigh the differences. The differences between the two countries, says Lipset, are within 5 to 10 percent as revealed by polls. One major difference, however, is that of national identity — something Canada has struggled to define. This is compounded by its two founder populations, the British and the French, and by experiments with a bilingual-bicultural identity that has finally given way to an official designation of Canada as "multicultural." National identity in the United States is more solidly based since there existed only one founder population, British, to which newcomers eventually assimilated. The American national identity is based on a vision of a single nation defined by democratic principles and united by a common public culture and a common medium of discourse. The two siblings, therefore, look a lot alike but are still two different individuals.

The U.S.-Canada Border

The United States-Canada border extends from the Pacific to the Atlantic some 4,000 miles across North America. When the border between Alaska and both British Columbia and the Yukon Territory is added, the total border between the United States and Canada is some 8,000 miles long. The very length of this border, says Roger Gibbins, has given it "a mythic significance, at least in Canada" (Gibbins 1997: 316). Another aspect of the border's mythic significance is its designation as the longest undefended border in the world. This often repeated statement, says Gibbins, reflects the similarities that unite the two countries, the fact that the United States need not defend itself against Canada, and Canada's inability to defend itself against the United States.

Despite all this, Canadians live in the shadow of their more powerful neighbor whose constant cultural and economic influence is often seen as an infringement on Canada's autonomy and its collective identity. The border, therefore, has a defining significance for Canadians that, as Gibbins says, "penetrates the Canadian consciousness, identity, economy, and polity to a degree unknown and unimaginable in the United States" (Gibbins 1997: 317). This particular significance comes not only from the power differential between the two countries, but also because of the physical proximity of the majority of the Canadian people to the border. In fact, four-fifths of the population lives only about 150 kilometers from the border. This, says Gibbins, has made Canada a "borderland society" in contrast to the United States, where the northern border plays almost no role at all in forming the national consciousness.

A New Era. Since the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, D.C. on September 11, 2001, the border separating the United States and Canada has taken on greater significance. To many Americans, the longest undefended border in the world now looks like

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a 4,000-mile-long portal for terrorists due, in part, to different political cultures making the kind of "harmonization" of policies necessary for a North American security zone impossible. Although no terrorists involved in the September 11 attacks entered via Canada, terrorists in the past, like Ahmed Ressam, have taken advantage of the lax border security.

In 1999, Ressam was caught carrying bomb-making ingredients at the border crossing in Port Angeles, Wash. He later confessed that he had planned an attack on the Los Angeles International Airport during the up-coming millennium celebration. Ressam had entered Canada without documents of any kind and claimed refugee status. He did not appear at the hearing scheduled by the Canadian government to review his case and subsequently lived in Canada where he was arrested several times without being expelled despite his flaunting of Canada's immigration laws. Ressam's eventual apprehension at the Port Angeles border crossing was the result of a custom agent's hunch.

After September 11, some members of Congress from border states complained that at night ports of entry were protected in many locations only by orange cones. As a result, measures have been taken to increase security on the U.S. side and to increase cooperation with Canadian authorities in a plan known as the "smart border." Yet, the problems that permitted Ahmed Ressam to enter Canada and live freely have not and, according to Canadian officials, will not be addressed to the satisfaction of their American counterparts.

Indiscriminately Welcoming All. Canada accepts twice as many immigrants and four times as many asylum seekers each year, as a proportion of its population, as the United States. David Harris, the former head of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service and now president of Insignis Strategic Research, told *Insight on the News* (6/24/02) that "the tidal wave of new people coming here . . . has got to statistically include a really significant number of very, very dangerous people in today's world who cannot possibly be screened out in any meaningful sense." Additionally, the screening system does very little to deal with those cases it *can* control. For example, Canada is unique in the world by allowing local hires in consulates abroad, not Canadian officials, to issue visas. According to one foreign-service officer, this makes the local hires "ripe targets for all kinds of social pressures and irresponsible temptations." Visas, however, are not always necessary for entry into Canada since Canada also has the most liberal asylum policy in the world (Bisset 2002). Newcomers can simply get on an airplane and request asylum upon arrival with no documents at all (often documents used to board the aircraft are destroyed in flight). On entering Canada, asylum seekers are given insurance, driver's licenses, and subsidies until their cases are heard. In the meantime, they are free to roam the country and to cross the border into the United States if they wish. Canada's free entry into the country and subsidized refugee status has resulted in 44,000 entries a year under the rubric of "asylum."

What the United States sees today when it looks at its northern flank is a neighbor that disregards document fraud, maintains lax visa practices, and has the most generous asylum policy in the world.

Successive Canadian governments have also taken advantage of the "peace dividend" since the end of the Cold War by progressively cutting back on defense spending and by putting the money elsewhere. Defense appropriations now stand at just 1.1 percent of the gross domestic product placing Canada just ahead, in percentage terms, of Luxembourg. The Canadian Coast Guard has also suffered from those spending cuts although its functions range well beyond purely military service to search and rescue as well as ice patrol and ice breaking missions. The depleted state of the Canadian Coast Guard also means that it is not able to play a meaningful role in closer security surveillance that could be important in making North America safer from terrorist infiltration.

After September 11, David Harris said that at least 50 known terrorists groups were inside Canada ranging from the IRA to Hezbollah, Hamas, and al-Qaeda. "Canada," says Harris, "has everything for the discriminating terrorist. It is a modern economy, so you can get money; channel it around the world" and "a vast immigrant population so you can fit in." Indeed, Canada is the "weak link" in America's defense against terrorist operations. U.S. security is only as good as Canadian security since the United States has no control over who comes into Canada and since the border is so easily crossed.

In sum, what the United States sees today when it looks at its northern flank is a neighbor that disregards document fraud, maintains lax visa practices, and has the most generous asylum policy in the world. Few asylum seekers are rejected, violators of immigration laws are not vigorously pursued, no one is tracked

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

once inside the country, terrorist groups have the freedom to raise money, criminal enterprises (people smugglers) are establishing a secure territorial base, and endless litigation negates the law and favors criminals. There is little prospect of changing any of this in a serious way, for as Canadians bluntly tell Americans, decisions of that kind are made in Ottawa not Washington.

Sibling Rivalry. When the Bush administration announced a strategy of attacking states that facilitate terrorist activity, the Canadian political elite was infuriated, provoking an outburst of anti-Americanism, name calling by Canadian officials, and most recently a rebuke from the American ambassador and an angry response by some members of Parliament. That hostility also seems to be shared by a significant portion of the Canadian population. No one is singing the American national anthem in Canada these days. In fact, the national anthem was recently booed in Montreal at a popular sports event. Our northern neighbor, therefore, may be less likely to cooperate with the United States on security issues, thereby increasing the risk to the United States along the longest undefended border in the world. Under these conditions, the border between the two children of a common mother has come to matter in ways not easily foreseen before September 11, 2002.

The U.S.-Mexico Border

The United States-Mexico border extends some 2,000 miles from the Pacific Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico, passing through some of the most inaccessible and desolate countryside in North America. For all its remoteness across vast empty spaces, the border is also the most heavily traveled land crossing in the world, with over 274 million crossings in 2002 alone (U.S. Dept. of Homeland Security). This traffic passes through corridors created by "paired" or "twin cities" that straddle the boundary, the largest of which is the San Diego-Tijuana greater metropolitan area with a combined population of over 4.1 million people. The border also differs from east to west. At its western end, the population is half Latino and more affluent due to its proximity to major California metropolitan areas. Near its eastern end, the population is almost entirely Latino and the poverty rate is high. In fact, Starr and Maverick counties in Texas are among the poorest in the nation.

Contrasting Institutions. The level of trust and cooperation between American and Mexican authorities is

> Not only is the U.S.-Mexico border a boundary between two nation-states, it marks the zone where two culture areas of the Western Hemisphere meet.

quite different from that encountered on the U.S.-Canadian border. This disjunction is partly a reflection of the difference in institutional effectiveness on either side of the line and partly a result of Mexican national identity defined by opposition to the United States. For example, an old cliché of American folklore and popular culture is high-tailing it across the border to escape the law. So prevalent is this motif that a parody on rapacious corporations, such as Enron and Global Crossing, depicts a band of CEOs making their way to safety across the border plundering villages and towns with their bookkeeping legerdemain along the way. Unfortunately, this romantic theme is more than a popular image. For even in this age of NAFTA and globalization, hundreds of Mexicans every year who have been found liable for damages in American civil courts or who are fugitives from the law in the United States find safe-haven simply by slipping across the border into Mexico. Since Mexican law prohibits the extradition of a fugitive charged with a capital crime and since the Mexican Supreme Court has recently extended that provision to those facing a sentence of life in prison, Mexico is also a potential haven for those criminals most dangerous to society. For people involved in such cases, the border matters very much indeed.

The border also divides countries that have different levels of toleration for and different ways of dealing with safety issues and pollution problems, oftentimes causing bothersome problems in border areas. Agreements are sometimes differently respected between the two countries. For example, under an international treaty signed in 1944, Texas towns and farmers are supposed to receive a certain allotment of water from the Rio Grande. Mexico has refused to respect the treaty and is hoarding water to the detriment of the American side of the boundary. Texas State Comptroller Carole Keaton Ryland told the Associated Press (10/11/02) that the Mexican refusal to deliver the needed water would cause $73 million dollars in economic damages in the Rio Grande Valley by year's end. This has become an issue at the highest levels of government. Secretary of State Colin Powell brought the matter up with then Mexican foreign minister Jorge Castañeda. "Do you have any water for me?" asked

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Journalist Robert Kaplan writes, "never in my life have I experienced such a sudden transition as when I crossed from Nogales, Sonora, to Nogales, Arizona."

Powell. "I've always got water for you, Colin" was the answer (*The New York Times,* 10/13/02). The problem persists.

Contrasting cultures. Not only is the U.S.-Mexico border a boundary between two nation-states, it marks the zone where two culture areas of the Western Hemisphere meet. The U.S.-Mexican borderland is also a divide between one of the greatest differences that separate countries today — the divide between the prosperity of the developed world and the relative poverty of the Third World. Indeed, the United States-Mexico border is the only land border in the world between those two important zones. Journalist Robert Kaplan, no stranger to borders, describes this difference in his own subjective way: He recounts traveling between East and West Germany while the wall was still up, the Iran-Iraqi border with Kurdish rebels, the "Green Line" that separates the antagonistic Greek and Turkish communities on Cyprus, and crossing the "Line of Demarcation" between Pakistan and India. Kaplan has also traveled from Damascus, Syria, to the demilitarized zone of the Golan Heights. "But never in my life," he says, "have I experienced such a sudden transition as when I crossed from Nogales, Sonora, to Nogales, Arizona, on November 1, 1995" (Kaplan 1998: 138-140).

The difference was not demographic or linguistic, for some 96 percent of the people on the U.S. side of the line are of Mexican descent and speak Spanish as well as English. The differences Kaplan saw are in the physical appearances of the two cities and the different levels of organization and efficiency one encounters on either side of the international boundary. It begins at the port of entry. "I saw how few people garrisoned the border station, yet how efficiently it ran," says Kaplan, contrasting the U.S. Nogales port of entry to the more disorganized border crossings characteristic of the Third World. He also saw how differently the town was laid out and maintained on the American side in contrast to the "chaos of Mexican construction:"

> *"The billboards, sidewalks, traffic markers, telephone and electric cable, and so on appeared straight, and all their curves and angles uniform . . . The store logos were made of expensive, tony polymers rather than cheap plastic. I heard no metal rattling in the wind. The cars were the same makes I had seen in Mexico, but oh how different: no more chewed-up, rusted bodies; no more cracked windshields held together by black tape; no more crosses and other good-luck charms hanging inside the windshields; no more noise from broken mufflers.*
>
> *The taxi I entered [on the U.S. side] had shock absorbers. The neutral gray upholstery was not shredded. The meter printed out receipts.*

The hotels in which he stayed on both sides of the boundary charged the same rate. On the Mexican side the establishment, which was only two years old, "was already falling apart: the doors didn't close properly, the paint was cracking, the walls were beginning to stain" while the hotel on the American side was "a quarter century old and in excellent condition" with everything neat and operational. Much of this discrepancy is attributable to the different levels of income that characterizes the two sides of the international line. Kaplan, however, believes that there is also a cultural dimension to the disparity. In this respect, "Was the developed world, I wondered, defined not by its riches and a lighter skin color but by maintenance? Maintenance indicates organization, frugality, and responsibility . . . " attributes that reflect "the prudent use of capital." Organization, frugality, responsibility on an aggregate scale are all cultural features that must be considered in the equation when explaining the wealth and poverty of nations.

Widespread Corruption. Another difference between Third World and developed countries is their differing degrees of what John Bailey and Roy Godson (2000) call governability, that is, "the abilities that government has to allocate values over society, to exercise ultimate authority in the context of generally accepted rules and procedures." So defined, governability can be measured in terms of the state's administrative capacities in a number of areas including how well the state can administer justice and guarantee the basic rights of its citizens. In that respect, Mexico differs sharply from the United States and Canada, a difference that is characteristic of the Latin and Anglo-Saxon culture areas of the Western Hemisphere.

For example, corruption is a persistent problem that bores deeply into Mexican institutions, seriously impeding the proper operation of the state. Journalists and social scientists have described this problem for the former administration in Mexico (Riding

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mexico has realigned its policies along the lines of an ethnic, rather than territorial, nation-state. With this redefinition, a Mexican is a Mexican no matter where he resides and no matter what other citizenship he may possess.

1984, Oppenheimer 1996, Rotella 1998, Morris 1991, Bailey and Godson 2000) and indeed it is still a serious problem for the Fox government. The police in Mexico, poorly paid, untrained and under the influence of patronage, have a terrible record not only of enforcing the law but for being law-breakers themselves. Local, state and federal police sometimes work for local politicians and even drug lords as armed guards. In some cases, they run their own criminal enterprises. A saying heard in Mexico goes, "if you get mugged don't yell, you may attract the police." There are hundreds of cases reported by Mexican human rights organizations, ordinary Mexican citizens, and American and Mexican-American visitors about police stopping travelers and demanding money from them. People who are sometimes stopped for infractions are held for long periods until their relatives can buy their freedom. Sometimes, when crime victims file complaints the police abuse them. Kaplan tells of a Mexican citizen in Mexico City who reported a stolen car. The police wanted to take his wife to the station to file a complaint. The crime victim would not let them take her, for once they got her to the station, he said, they would rape her. Indeed, rape by police is not uncommon in Mexico where prosecution of guilty parties is difficult and in most cases impossible.

Sometimes no infractions are involved and the *mordida* (bribe) becomes outright extortion. If the victim is too poor, he often ends up in prison where he must pay for the most rudimentary of needs such as a bed to sleep on and some modicum of protection from other inmates or his jailers. One of the worst abuses of Mexican police is their custom of torturing suspects in order to extract confessions. A joke heard in Mexico tells of a contest between the FBI, Scotland Yard, and whatever Mexican police force is the brunt of the joke. The three agencies let a rabbit loose, and bet on which one can find it the fastest. The Mexican police come in first with an elephant in handcuffs, the elephant constantly muttering "I'm a rabbit, I'm a rabbit." According to the United Nations, Amnesty International, and other human rights organizations in Mexico and abroad, Mexico has the worst record of torture in the world. The *Washington Post* detailed this widespread police abuse as well as the grave deficiencies in the Mexican justice system and the way in which corruption is crippling the function of the state (Sullivan, Jordan, 2002).

Illegal aliens from Central America cross Mexico's southern border with Guatemala either to work in Mexico or to make the clandestine transit through Mexico to the United States. Such people are at risk for abuse at the hands of corrupt Mexican police and immigration officials. After a visit to Mexico's southern border, United Nations special rapporteur Gabriela Rodriquez said: "Mexico is one of the countries where illegal immigrants are highly vulnerable to human rights violations of degrading sexual exploitation and slavery-like practices, and are denied access to education and healthcare" (Grayson 2002: 10). Mexican illegals on their way to the U.S.-Mexico border are likewise the victims of such abuses by Mexican police. Shortly after his election Vincente Fox went to the border at Nogales and asked the police to stop abusing emigrants, whom Fox called "heroes."

Redefining Mexico. Illegal Mexican immigrants to the United States are often seen as "heroes" by the Mexican elite since the exodus from Mexico of low skilled labor acts as a safety-valve for Mexican society as well as the source of a $10 billion flow of money in the form of remittances from Mexicans working in the United States (*The Arizona Republic*, 1/25/2003). In order to take advantage of the exodus, Mexico has changed its designation from a Latin American country to a North American country, has called for EU-styled borders within NAFTA, and has realigned its policies along the lines of an ethnic, rather than territorial, nation-state. With this redefinition, a Mexican is a Mexican no matter where he resides and no matter what other citizenship he may possess. The hope of the Mexican elite is that a dual citizen voting block of Mexican immigrants and their descendents might provide the means by which the Mexican government can bypass American sovereignty and exert influence on U.S. policy (Aquilar Zinser 2001(a), 2001(b)).

Mexico has instituted two different border policies — one for its southern border and another for its northern border. In the south, the government's *Plan Sur* has militarized the border and toughened deportation. The reason, says the head of Mexico's immigration service, Felipe de Jesus Preciado, is be-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The creation of a special Mexican police force to protect Mexican citizens on Mexican soil from Mexican police is yet another measure of the low level of governability in that country.

cause Central Americans crossing illegally into Mexico are "a security problem." They use the same routes and trails as smugglers, he says, and they also cause difficulties for Mexican border towns. "It would not be a big problem," he said, "if they were getting through to the United States, but they get stuck and they hang around the frontier cities making trouble, sleeping in the streets with no money." In response to such observations, Blanca Villasenor, of the Mexican-based human rights organization *Sin Fronteras*, disapprovingly observes, "In the south the Mexicans are repeating the same discourse as the United States" (*The Washington Times*, 8/13/2001). Another reason Mexico controls its southern border is to limit the number of non-Mexicans making the illegal crossing into the United States in order to preserve Mexican predominance in that lucrative and, potentially, politically beneficial practice of the ruling elite.

Mexico is militarizing its southern border. Mexican authorities are abusing vulnerable illegal migrants. And all the while, Mexican government facilitates the illegal flow of Mexican migration northward while complaining about measures taken by the United States to police its own border. Fox named former Governor of Baja California, Ernesto Ruffo Appel, as the Commissioner of the Northern Border, an agency created by the president when he took office in 2000. In reference to the hundreds of thousands of Mexicans clandestinely crossing the border, Ruffo Appel told a reporter for the Mexico City *News* (March 8, 2001) that he would like to mount a public awareness campaign to warn potential illegal entrants of the dangers of their enterprise "with an eye towards improving migrants' crossing practices."

Even before Fox took office, the Mexican government took measures to protect illegal migrants while still on Mexican soil with the creation of a special police force known as Grupo Beta. Journalist Sebastian Rotella describes these plain clothesmen in action. "Piratical-looking men in army jackets materialize out of the night" where they join a crowd of cowering emigrants near the fences. The huddled emigrants cringe at the strangers' approach. "The officers crouch next to the migrants to survey the landscape, the gleaming-wet silhouettes of the U.S. Border Patrol vehicles gliding through the mist. The officers pass out business cards. Don't worry *compa*, we're the police, Beta *Gobernacion* (Interior Ministry). We are here to help. Any problems? Seen bandits around? Any police bother you? Let us know" (Rotella 1998: 92).

Grupo Beta has even prepared a pamphlet in comic book form written in simple Spanish and illustrated with colored pictures explaining how to deal with hazards on the way to their illegal border crossing. The pamphlet also includes directions on how to file complaints against police who have exploited them. The creation of a special Mexican police force to protect Mexican citizens on Mexican soil from Mexican police is yet another measure of the low level of governability in that country. The fact that such protection is given by one country to facilitate the violation of the law of a neighbor tells us how far apart the two countries really are and thus how much the border matters in that respect.

Border Chaos. Criminal activities abound along the U.S.-Mexico border centering on the smugling of both people and drugs. The two are often intertwined, adding to corruption in border communities on both sides of the line and hardships to American citizens on their side of the border. Frequent incursions into the United States by armed Mexican police and military are routine. Among the many incidents reported is a confrontation between Mexican soldiers and Nogales, Arizona, police inside smugglers' tunnels that burrow beneath the city. Another case is that of a Mexican army patrol inside the United States who fired on a mounted Border Patrolman in New Mexico. Many observers say that armed Mexican police and soldiers inside the United States are working on behalf of smugglers and other criminal elements. A deeply concerned Border Patrol union has made some of those incidents public and Rep. Tom Tancredo from Colorado has protested to the Mexican government.

Border counties, often among the poorest in the country, are also forced to bear the financial burden of higher immigrant-induced costs to the criminal justice system as well as its emergency medical system. Ranchers, Indians on the Tohono O'odhom reservation in Arizona, and other property owners also suffer financial damage due to mass migration across their land — many live in fear in their own homes. National parks on or near the border also suffer environmental damage due to the sheer numbers of people illegally crossing the border in remote places. The bor-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The different levels of governability between the two countries is every bit as salient to the casual observer as are the differences in language, architecture, music, art, and ways of life.

der with Mexico is thus configured and matters in a way very different from that which separates the United States from Canada.

U.S.-Mexico Border Perceptions

Whereas Americans give little thought to the Canadian border, the Mexican border looms much larger in the collective American mind, for it is connected with the vision of the frontier that plays such an important role in the self-definition of the American nation. The frontier vision and the virtues popularly associated with it have taken on mythic proportions as expressed over and over again in history books and in countless novels, films, and other images of popular culture. The border also marks a sharp contrast in the American popular mind between the American and the Mexican nations, "encapsulating" the national community and contrasting it with its southern neighbor. The different levels of governability between the two countries is also every bit as salient to the casual observer as are the differences in language, architecture, music, art, and ways of life. This popular image can perhaps best be summarized by reference to a novel, *The Crossing* by Cormac McCarthy. One of the characters in the novel, a young boy, asks, "Why can't the law go to Mexico?" His older brother answers, "Cause it's American law. It ain't worth nothing in Mexico." When asked about Mexican law the older brother says, "There ain't no law in Mexico. It's a pack of rogues."

Reclaiming America. Just as Canadians and Americans imagine their common border in different ways, so too is there a difference between the way Mexicans and Americans view the boundary that separates their two countries. Americans overwhelmingly imagine their national community and its territorial integrity as defined by a strictly delineated boundary between their country and Mexico. A 2002 Zogby poll (taken in the United States) illustrates this perception. Of the people surveyed in the poll, 68 percent agreed with the statement, "The US should deploy military troops on the border as a temporary measure to help the U.S. Border Patrol curb illegal immigration." Only 28 percent disagreed while 3 percent were unsure. In contrast to these findings, a Zogby International poll, commissioned by Americans for Immigration Control, asked a random sample of 801 adults throughout Mexico if they agreed or disagreed with the statement, "the territory of the United States' Southwest belongs to Mexico." Of those surveyed, 58 percent agreed with that statement and 57 percent agreed with a follow-up statement: "Mexicans should have the right to enter the United States without permission." Only 28 percent disagreed and 14 percent were unsure.

A song entitled *Somos mas Americanos* on *Uniendo Fronteras* (uniting borders), an album by the Grammy-winning, *Tigres del Norte*, expresses a sentiment that strikes a responsive chord among many Mexican immigrants and among many of their descendants. The song was high on *Billboard*'s Latin album chart for three weeks in 2001 (translation provided by Allan Wall):

"A thousand times they have shouted at me
'Go home, you don't belong here'
Let me remind the Gringo
That I didn't cross the border, the border crossed me
America was born free – man divided her
They drew the line so we had to jump it
And they call me the invader . . .

They purchased from us, without money, the waters of the Rio Bravo
They took from us Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and Colorado
California too and Nevada
Even with Utah it was not enough – they also took Wyoming from us!

We are more American than any son of the Anglo-Saxon . . .
We are more American than every last one of the Gringos

Mutual Distrust. Differences in popular perceptions of the border from both sides of the line also parallel a gap in confidence between Americans and Mexicans on all levels. "Elites at the pinnacle of power in each country still wonder whether their counterpart is telling the truth," say Jorge Dominquez and Rafael Fernando de Castro. "And no matter what the elites say, many people in each of these two countries have too little trust for the other. Many Mexicans and U.S.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

citizens believe, for example, that their governments fooled them when NAFTA was signed" (Dominquez and Fernandez de Castro 2001: 34). The authors also note, "Mendacity remains a serious threat to the continued good relations between the United States and Mexico, because it threatens the core functioning of the international institutions on which their relationship has come to rest and public support within each country for the relationship and its instruments." The differences between the two countries were emphasized even more sharply after the September 11 attacks. Osama bin Laden t-shirts were sold in Mexico City, Vincente Fox hesitated to extend support to his northern NAFTA partner, the Mexican military refused to cooperate more closely with its American counterpart, and Mexico joined France in resisting American military action in Iraq.

The border, therefore, matters in different ways to both Mexicans and Americans, reflecting a wider gap between the two nations than most people realize. This gap could become the basis of more than a quiet difference of sentiment, growing into something more serious as the Second Great Migration continues to change the demographic, cultural, and economic landscape of the American Southwest.

Expanding Borderland

A boundary is a line drawn across the landscape separating different sovereign states. You can see it painted yellow at the port of entry at San Ysidro, California, the busiest border crossing in the world. A few inches on either side of the line stand two monuments. The one on the American side is in English and the one on the Mexican side is in Spanish, both proclaiming the sovereignty of the two nations. You can literally stand with one foot in Mexico and the other in the United States. Borders, however, have a far wider reality than that, for a zone of interaction usually develops at any place where two cultures meet, whether along an international boundary or not. These zones are called borderlands and, from a cultural point of view, are the most interesting thing about borders.

A Transformation. Since the 1970s and especially since the beginning of the surge of immigration in the 1980s, the demographic, linguistic, and cultural make-up of the population of the borderland on the U.S. side of the line has become increasingly Mexican. Journalist Joel Garreau described the uniqueness of the borderland as he saw it in 1979:

The borderland on the American side of the line is expanding northward and creating a distinctive regional difference in the United States.

> *"Somewhere around the border town of Houston, maybe half way to Beaumont, the grits give way to refried beans and the pines give way to earth shades of red and brown. You know you're out of Dixie and into MexAmerica.*
>
> *"This strip nation runs for half a continent 200 to 300 miles north of the border with Mexico. It is a nation what the United States in the 80s will be – one in which the biggest minority will be not blacks, but Hispanics* (quoted in Hanson 1981: 8).

Only 22 years later in growing parts of this "strip nation," the biggest minority is becoming the Anglo population that only a short time ago was the majority.

Some, like Oscar Martinez, speak of a unique border culture uniting both sides of the boundary, created and sustained through personal and cultural ties (Martinez 1994). Others, however, perceive a different reality. According to Rodolfo de la Garza, from Columbia University and vice president of the Tomas Rivera Policy Institute, the idea of a bicultural border community is "romantic." People on either side, he says, still live essentially separate lives. Jerry Polinard of the University of Texas, Pan American agrees. Despite changes that have taken place, he says, the border still separates the two countries in a significant manner. It is likely that there is truth in both perceptions, revealing that forces of change are still in play. Yet, the degree to which the two sides remain separate in the sense described above by Kaplan, the border as a line on the ground still matters in a very substantial manner.

The borderland on the American side of the line, however, is expanding northward and creating a distinctive regional difference in the United States. Statistics illustrate that many demographic, social, and economic features in this area are characteristic of the Third World. Josefina Figueiroa-McDonough, from the University of Arizona, says that an underclass is developing in Arizona that, she warns, will not go away. Surveying the overall picture, Center for Immigration Studies Director of Research Steven Camarota predicts that Arizona may be on its way to becoming the "new

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Borders matter not only in an instrumental sense but in a symbolic sense as well, both for the state's assertion of power and legitimacy and in the way citizens imagine their nations as limited sovereign communities.

Appalachia" (*The Arizona Republic*, 1/8/01), a description already applicable to the borderlands at the eastern end of the boundary. Besides the economic and demographic features of the expanding borderland, Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rimbaut (2001) also see indications that assimilation is not working there in the same way it worked nationwide during the first Great Migration. If this continues, the expanding of borderlands, where poverty correlated with racial, cultural, and linguistic features and with the awareness that the region was once ruled by the government of the sender country, may result in a different outcome. People of Mexican descent may be prompted to think of themselves in ways different from the descendants of earlier waves of migration, whose ancestors had to cross an ocean to get here instead of a line drawn across the continent. In fact, Samuel P. Huntington says that Mexican migration across the border "is unique, disturbing, and a looming challenge to our cultural integrity, our national identity, and potentially to the future of our country" (Huntington 2000).

Summary and Conclusions

In sum, borders matter not only in an instrumental sense but in a symbolic sense as well, both for the state's assertion of power and legitimacy and in the way citizens imagine their nations as limited sovereign communities. In this respect, the borders of North America are no different from other borders of the world. North American borders, however, are unique since they divide one of the earth's seven continents into three large and important nation-states that differ in significant ways from one another. Mexico is perhaps the most advanced nation in Latin America, yet it remains a country struggling to rise from its Third World status. The United States, at this point in history, is the pre-eminent economic, political, cultural and military power in the world. Canada is significant among the developed democratic countries of the world, appearing diminished only by its geographic proximity to its larger neighbor. Perhaps a more graphic way of depicting these countries and the borders that divide them is to imagine a color-coded map of North America, similar to the weather maps that appear in daily newspapers, where political and cultural features, like varying temperature zones, are differently colored and shaded.

The United States and Canada could be colored blue to depict their common Anglo-Saxon heritage and language (with the perennial exception of Quebec), yet a blue that appears in different shades — darker on the U.S. side and lighter in Canada — to depict the different political cultures of the two sovereignties. What Lipset calls, "still Whig, still Tory." The sharp line dividing the two shades of blue represents the international border that clearly distinguishes the two sovereignties from one another despite their other cultural similarities.

Mexico, on the other hand, might be colored yellow to depict its Latin culture, shaded differently from other Latin countries to the south to depict their national differences in the same way shades of blue differentiate the United States from Canada. Again, the line depicting the border is sharply drawn. However, a band on the northern side of the line would be colored green rather than blue, the result of mixing yellow and blue. The blending from light green at the boundary itself to a slowly darkening shade of blue as one moves north, represents a northward expanding borderland and an evolving reality for the American Southwest and eventually for the nation as a whole. This is why the borders of North America still matter to the nations they divide.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Bibliography

Andreas, Peter. 2000. *Border Games: Policing the U.S.-Mexico Divide.* Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

Aquilar Zinser, Adolfo. 2001 (a) (May 5). "La Noche de la Migra. *El Siglo del Torreon.*

Aquilar Zinser, Adolfo. 2001 (b) (August 24). "La Migracion y la Nueva Vecinidad. *El Siglo del Torreon.*

Bailey, John and Roy Godson. 2000. *Organized Crime and Democratic Governability: Mexico and the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands.* Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press.

Bisset, James. 2002 (May). "Canada's Asylum System: a Threat to American Security?" *Backgrounder.* Washington D.C.: Center for Immigration Studies. http://www.cis.org/articles/2002/back402.html

Borden, Tessie. "Migrants Seek Voice in Mexico Politics," *The Arizona Republic*, January 25, 2003.

Cohen, Anthony C. 1985. *The Symbolic Construction of Community.* New York: Tavistock Publications.

Dominquez, Jorge L. and Rafael Fernandez de Castro. 2001. *The United States and Mexico: Between Partnership and Conflict*. New York: Routledge.

Gibbins, Roger. 1997. "The Meaning and Significance of the American-Canadian Border." In, Ganster, Paul, et. al. (eds). *Borders and Border Regions of Europe and North America.* San Diego: San Diego State University Press.

Grayson, George. 2002 (July) "Mexico's Forgotten Southern Border". *Backgrounder*. Washington D.C.: Center for Immigration Studies. http://www.cis.org/articles/2002/back702.html

Hanson, Niles. 1981. *Border Economy*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Huntington, Samuel P. 2000 (November). "Reconsidering Immigration: Is Mexico a Special Case?" *Backgrounder*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Immigration Studies. http://www.cis.org/articles/2000/back1100.html

Jordan, Mary. "In Mexico the Unpunished Crime," *The Washington Post*, June 30, 2002.

Kaplan, Robert D. 1998. *An Empire Wilderness: Travels into America's Future.* New York: Random House.

Lipset, Seymour Martin. 1990: *Continental Divide: the Values and Institutions of the United States and Canada*. New York: Routledge.

Martinez, Oscar. 1994. *Border People: Life and Society in the United States-Mexico Borderlands.* Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

Morris, Stephen D. 1998. *Corruption and Politics in Contemporary Mexico.* Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press.

Ohmae, Kenichi. 1990. *Borderless World: Power and Strategy in the Interlinked World.* New York: Harper Business.

Oppenheimer, Andreas. 1996. *Bordering on Chaos.* Boston: Little Brown and Company.

Portes, Alejandro and Ruben G. Rumbaut. 2001. *Legacies: the Story of the Immigrant Second Generation.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Riding, Alan. 1984. *Distant Neighbors: A Portrait of the Mexicans.* New York: Vintage Books.

Rotella, Sebastian 1998. *Twilight on the Line: Underworld and Politics at the U.S.-Mexico Border*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Sullivan, Kevin. "In Mexico Hinterland, Life Beyond the Law," *The Washington Post*, March 15, 2002.

Thompson, Ginger, and Tim Weiner. "Mexico Struggles for the Attention of a Preoccupied U.S." *The New York Times.* October 13, 2002.

Tuckman, Johanna. "Mexico lobbies for open borders but slams shut its southern door," *The Washington Times*, August 13, 2001.

U.S. Department of Homeland Security. 2002. Office of Immigration Statistics. "Aliens and Citizens Admitted and Total Inspected by Land by Selected Port of Entries at the Southwest Border, Fiscal Year 2002." Datasheet, SAS system.

Weise, Julie. "Border Czar Ruffo: Economics is Key to Solving Region's Woes," *The News* (Mexico). March 8, 2001.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NON-PROFIT
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
PERMIT #6117
WASHINGTON, DC

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Center for Immigration Studies
1522 K Street NW, Suite 820
Washington, DC 20005-1202

Backgrounder

North American Borders: Why They Matter

By Glynn Custred

A view held by many today, especially in the business world and among libertarians, is that borders will eventually melt away in the face of new market forces, resulting in what business consultant Kenichi Ohmae envisions as a "borderless world." What is really happening is more complex. Some borders are eroding while others are undergoing transformations and reconfigurations of different kinds. And in the European Union, as internal borders have been reduced, new outer borders have been created that function like those of traditional national boundaries. Borders, therefore, still matter and will matter for some time to come. This is nowhere more clearly revealed than in the case of the changing borders of North America.

8-03

Center for Immigration Studies
1522 K Street NW, Suite 820
Washington, DC 20005-1202
(202) 466-8185 • Fax (202) 466-8076
center@cis.org • www.cis.org